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NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR SMOFFAT

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TAGS: [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: SA'ADA WAR: ROYG BOMBING ALLEGEDLY KILLS 87
CIVILIANS

REF: SANAA 1532

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Multiple media sources report that the ROYG conducted an airstrike against a school in Amran governorate in which IDPs had sought shelter, killing 87 civilians, mostly women and children. ROYG officials, including President Saleh, say that only Houthis were killed in the bombing and that there were no official IDP camps in the area. While the incident has not been independently verified, credible tribal, UN, NGO and media sources aver that a number of civilians were indeed killed. President Saleh appointed a powerful local sheikh, Abdu Husein Hubeish, as the head of a fact-finding committee to investigate the alleged attack against civilians. The airstrike may stymie current efforts to establish an IDP camp in Amran governorate, as residents from the village adjacent to the proposed site fear they may be the next target. The 28,000 IDPs scattered across Amran governorate have yet to receive aid, though relief agencies have pre-positioned food and non-food items so that distribution can begin as soon as the security situation allows. The ROYG announced on September 18 a ceasefire on the occasion of the Eid al-Fitr holiday, to begin on September 19 and remain in effect as long as the Houthis adhere to five conditions. The prospects for a lasting or effective humanitarian ceasefire, however, remain unlikely. END SUMMARY.

UNVERIFIED BUT CREDIBLE REPORTS OF SCHOOL BOMBING

¶2. (SBU) Multiple media sources report that the ROYG conducted an airstrike against al-Adi village (Amran governorate) in daylight hours on September 16, killing more than 87 civilian IDPs, mostly women and children, seeking shelter in a school. Al-Adi is in eastern Harf Sufyan, the site of some of the sixth war's heaviest clashes. The incident has yet to be independently confirmed. However, UNHCR Representative Claire Bourgeois told PolOff on September 18 that, while they "still have contradicting information," she is "relatively confident...that something happened and some civilians were killed." A UNHCR team was in Amran on September 18 to attempt to speak to witnesses and verify reports. Houthi website Al-Minbar.com published a list of names of more than 30 civilian victims, which was picked up by Al-Ishtiraki news. At a September 16 gathering of about 40 tribal sheikhs from northern Amran at the home of ruling General People's Congress (GPC) General Committee member and Bakil leader Mohammed Abulahoum, the tribal leaders said that the attack did in fact take place, and many civilians were killed. One tribal leader said he lost many members of his family and others added that funerals were already taking place in al-Adi. (Note: Abulahoum asked the tribal leaders to provide a list of names of those injured to the ROYG to speed the investigation, which they promised to

do. End Note.) If confirmed, the September 16 event in al-Adi could represent the heaviest number of casualties in a single incident in the sixth war.

13. (S/NF) The ROYG does not deny that the airstrike took place, but insists that only Houthis -) not civilians -- were involved. In a September 19 meeting with the Ambassador, President Saleh dismissed concerns over the al-Adi bombing, claiming that an official investigation is underway and that all of Harf Sufyan's residents are Houthis, even the women who were killed in the airstrike, who "were making food for the Houthis." Saleh said that whenever the Houthis are attacked, they accuse the government of attacking civilians, when in fact "we are hitting their headquarters." Bourgeois reported that Minister of Health Abdulkarim al-Rase, who is in charge of IDP relief efforts, told her on September 17 that the incident was a clash between the ROYG and Houthi fighters and denied that any civilians were killed. He later challenged her to provide the names of any civilians killed in the airstrike. Official media reports that warplanes fired back at Houthis who were attacking them while using civilians as human shields. The ROYG also said that three major Houthi leaders were killed in the attack. According to Naseem al-Rehman, Chief of Communications and Advocacy for UNICEF, the ROYG also claims that military planes flying above al-Adi saw armed people running for shelter below. But as Rehman pointed out, "everyone in Yemen carries a weapon;" having a gun is not evidence of being a Houthi fighter. Given Yemen's gun culture and the nature of the conflict, sources report that a high percentage of IDPs are also armed. For IDPs fleeing the fighting, a weapon is both a means of protection and a valuable possession.

14. (S/NF) To appease tribal outrage about the attack, President Saleh announced that a fact-finding committee led by Sheikh Abdu Husein Hubeish would investigate the airstrike. Official Saba news quoted an anonymous source in the Supreme Security Committee (SSC) announcing the fact-finding committee's formation while at the same time asserting that there were no IDPs in the area, which was a Houthi post for launching attacks against citizens and the armed forces. In fact, during an August 25 meeting with EmbOffs, MOD Chief of Staff Major General Ahmed al-Ashwal acknowledged that the IDPs in Amran)- totaling approximately 28,000, according to UNHCR -- were not housed in camps. While no official IDP camp is located in Amran governorate, post sources confirm that a group of IDPs had sought refuge in al-Adi. The vast majority of IDPs fleeing the sixth war are not housed in the four official IDP camps)- three in Sa'ada governorate and one in Hajja governorate)- but are scattered in small groups of 10 or 20, crowded into relatives' homes or living in schools, under trees, in their own tents, or anywhere else they can find shelter.

RELIEF EFFORTS STYMIED IN AMRAN GOVERNORATE

15. (SBU) The 28,000 IDPs scattered across Amran governorate, Yemen's poorest, have not yet been reached by aid agencies, though food and non-food items (NFIs) have been pre-positioned in warehouses in the governorate's capital so that distribution can begin as soon as the security situation allows. The ongoing fighting, coupled with tribal land disputes, has complicated UNHCR efforts to establish an IDP camp in Amran governorate. The site where UNHCR had begun setting up a camp was abandoned on September 15 because of threats and shootings by members of the tribes claiming ownership of the land. A new site was selected, and the village had agreed to allow it to be built on their lands, but the school bombing has caused them to re-consider. Bourgeois told PolOff that the villagers are worried about possible repercussions; they are afraid that one of their public buildings may be mistakenly hit by the ROYG if an IDP camp is established nearby. Bourgeois finds their fears indicative that the al-Adi school bombing did in fact take place; if it hadn't, "why would they be so afraid?" (Note: While fearful of ROYG airstrikes, villagers did not express concerns about Houthi attacks. Aside from government sources, no observers are reporting Houthi attacks against

civilians. UNICEF's Rehman said he has not received any such reports. He said that IDPs flee "out of fear of government bombing and shelling. The Houthis are not known to be a group that's done anything like that." End Note.)

COMMENT

¶16. (S/NF) While there is still no clear understanding of what took place in al-Adi, it is likely that dozens of civilians were killed as the result of an aerial bombing. The prospects for an effective or lasting humanitarian ceasefire appear unlikely. Sultan al-Barakani, assistant secretary general of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC), was quoted in the official media saying that the ROYG will continue military operations through Eid until the rebels are totally eliminated. On September 18, Post issued a statement calling for a 72-hour ceasefire over the Eid holiday to allow relief agencies to deliver emergency food and medical supplies. That night, the ROYG announced an Eid ceasefire, but one that would stay in effect only if the Houthis comply with the ROYG's five conditions. (Note: In August the ROYG demanded the Houthis meet six conditions for a ceasefire (reftel). According to MOD daily 26 September, the ROYG has since modified a few of these conditions and dropped the one requiring the Houthis to clarify the fate of six foreigners kidnapped in Sa'ada in June. End Note.) The ROYG's Eid ceasefire announcement, then, appears to be doomed to failure. The Houthis will not comply with its conditions, and the ROYG knows as much. END COMMENT.
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